

Urban Gardening in Haiti



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[Photo Caption: Container gardens are a common strategy for growing food in confined spaces.]

Residents of some of the poorest urban areas of Haiti are now using tires, baskets, kettles, pails, and other containers to grow vegetables in confined areas and thereby improve their health, nutrition status, and income.

Under the supervision of CARE-Haiti and other partners, so far more than 400 people from 11 neighbourhoods in Port-au-Prince and Gonaïves have attended training sessions on how to establish gardens where space is limited. As a result, many participants are both adding variety to their meals and increasing their number — most Haitian families eat just one or two meals per day.

Five-year initiative

Launched in November 1996, the urban gardening project is designed to reduce the dependency of participating households on purchased food in a nation where the average annual per capita income is less than CA\$350. The five-year initiative, which grew out of studies conducted by CARE-Haiti, is jointly sponsored by the [Canadian International Development Agency](#) (CIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s [Cities Feeding People](#) program initiative, [CARE-Canada](#), [CARE-USA](#), CARE-Haiti, and various community-based and non-governmental organizations.

The funds provided by IDRC, CARE-Canada/CIDA, and CARE-USA are specifically helping CARE-Haiti to design, implement, monitor, and evaluate space-confined gardening methods, including technologies tested in other IDRC-sponsored projects. For example, team members have been using e-mail group lists from the [Support Group for Urban Agriculture](#) (SGUA) and the [Latin American Urban Agriculture Research Network](#) (AGUILA) to obtain information and advice.

Demographics

The Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, is home to 1.2 million people — 60% of the country's total urban population — of whom 75% live in slums and only 15-20% of adults work regularly. Although food purchases absorb almost 50% of household expenditures, the average resident eats no more than two home-cooked meals per week, relying instead on food from street vendors or small eating houses.

Many Port-au-Prince families live in shanty towns consisting of small houses with metal walls and roofs, although some residents inhabit larger houses with flat concrete roofs. Homes are generally built close to each other — leaving no space between buildings, apart from roads — or on steep slopes. Despite this, urban agriculture has been practiced as a survival strategy in many parts of the city by residents who plant a few crops or a couple of fruit trees next to their house or in available vacant lands. But this is mainly done on a do-it-yourself basis, without any formal support. These resourceful gardeners are often envied by their neighbours, who either lack the knowledge required to manage an urban garden, or the space and water necessary to grow food.

Participants

Under the CARE-Haiti and partners initiative, more and more residents are obtaining the skills and resources they need to establish urban gardens. Participants of the training sessions have a variety of occupations, although few have stable or regular jobs. The women include merchants, factory workers, seamstresses, and domestic servants. The men include carpenters, bricklayers, and chauffeurs. Some primary school students and their teachers are also attending the sessions.

During the training period, participants learn how to convert spaces — ranging from backyards and vacant lots to roofs, walls, porches, and verandahs — into garden plots suitable for growing food. (In some cases, participants are sharing their rooftop space with trusted neighbours who lack a solid roof.) One of the most common strategies involves growing vegetables in recycled containers, particularly old tires because they are easy to find, inexpensive, and durable. As a result, graduates of these sessions have started cultivating amaranth, Swiss chard, tomatoes, eggplant, beets, carrots, Chinese cabbage, lettuce, peas, leeks, peppers, and other produce.

Benefits

According to CARE-Haiti officials, "the most visible impact of these gardens is on the nutritional health of the participants." Although the economic impact is less evident, some people have found larger growing spaces and are beginning to sell their produce. Moreover, the project has resulted in some related income-generating activities such as the launch of two gardening stores, where participants can obtain seeds and other essential supplies. Similar outlets are being planned for other areas of Port-au-Prince.

To make the best use of local resources, two community groups are trying to organize composting at the neighbourhood level. Indeed, some participants are already making their own compost. The project has also helped participants deal with scarce water supplies by sprinkling their gardens with recycled household wastewater. Other resources being put to use include cow and horse manure, and bagasse (sugar cane residue).

Real interest

"This pilot project has demonstrated that there is a real interest in establishing urban gardens among residents of the shanty towns and the organizations that work with them," states [Mildred Delphin Régis](#), the CARE-Haiti project manager. "It has given participants another image of themselves, by instilling in them the confidence that they can improve their situation by applying their own means and skills. The most important long-term result will be to upgrade human resources, now largely marginalized, so that they can bring about a change in the country's situation."

"Our goal is to continue building on the achievements of this project. The opportunities are vast, and there is a need for more in-depth research that cannot be conducted within the time frame of a single project," concludes Régis. "One priority is to enlist universities and research centres, a task which we are already addressing."

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